

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

George Douglas, Assistant City Editor ■ 892-2743

Bone hunters strike it rich in old dig

Stegosaurus, sauropod and dinosaur eggshells turn up in abandoned quarry near Cañon City

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Cañon City — Pecking the rocks with dental picks, treating them with acid, caressing them with soft brushes, the bone hunters slowly peel back a paper-thin layer of Earth's skin, and expose one of the planet's early inhabitants:

A chubby 25-foot lizard that died about 140 million years ago, perhaps beached on an ancient river sandbar.

Pondering the eons that have rolled by since this 3-ton stegosaurus last saw the light of day would seem an even more dizzying experience than digging under the hot sun.

But, strangely, staring down time's gaping maw does little to change a person's outlook, said Kenneth Carpenter, who is leading the team of paleontologists now hunkered down along the Morrison rock formation in the Garden Park fossil reserve.

"In part," he murmured, as his eyes surveyed the landscape, "because I suppose it's not really comprehensible."

These same scraggy mountains and pockets of juniper that surround Carpenter's team were the spartan backdrop for the "bone wars" — those epic but petty struggles between two prima donna paleontologists of the 19th century.

The 500-acre area north of Cañon City yielded some of the most thrilling dinosaur discoveries ever made — skyscraper skeletons of reptilian monsters that spring to mind whenever the word "dinosaur" is mentioned.

Nevertheless, Garden Park lay



Photos by Cyrus McCormick/Rocky Mountain News

Museum workers unearth the remains of a stegosaurus in the Garden Park fossil reserve.



John Shinton of Northglenn, a museum volunteer, brushes away particles while separating the stegosaurus bones from the soil.

dormant for ages until Carpenter, a paleontologist with the Denver Museum of Natural History, returned last summer.

A couple of encouraging finds inspired him to return this summer, and the past week has apparently reaffirmed Garden Park as

one of the Earth's great graveyards, with three major discoveries reported.

At sites just a few miles apart, the scientists have unearthed a teen-aged sauropod (a brontosaurus-like beast), a large, mature stegosaurus (perhaps complete with skull), and fragments of dinosaur eggs that may lead to a petrified nest.

"Even though thousands of bones have been shipped out of this area, it is still producing," Carpenter said. "I think that we're just beginning to scratch the surface."

Such a flurry of discovery has been an unexpected and mixed blessing for Carpenter's small team. What scant resources and manpower they had marshaled for one dig have clearly been stretched to the limit.

See **DINOSAUR** on 51